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# Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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HEIDI BLAU

It was exactly a year before Hitler took over in Austria that Heidi Blau had an experience which, if she survived the Holocaust, would be entrenched in her mind for the rest of her days. I say "if she survived" because I have no idea what happened to her after 1939, as I have no clue to the fate of many of my classmates. Only the smallest number of them has come to my attention in the years following the afternoon I am about to call back to mind.

We were fifteen students of the Jewish persuasion, none of us older than sixteen, who met every Monday afternoon for religious instruction. Students of whatever faith were required to attend religious classes, for the Austrian regime prior to annexation to Germany was "pro-religious", largely as a token of its anti-socialist value system. And while the government was far from philosemitic--if anything the opposite was true--it held fast to its "philosophy" of God's presence in the state as well as in the classroom.

Thus it was that ten teenage boys and five teenage girls assembled once a week to receive what in the United States is usually covered in the best Sunday schools. Before I open the curtain to the scene which is the substance of this slice of life's memory, I have to explain one or two facts about the general situation in early 1937, a year before the country lost its independence. The Austrian regime was in the hands of a clerical, authoritarian group of men, emphatically Catholic, patriotic, and allergic to the multiple party system, opposed to both Marxism and Nazism, both of which having been outlawed years earlier, fighting against the German threat, but refusing the co-operation of the democratic forces, and trying alone to resist Hitler's pressure. One principle of the authorities was that all pre-university students had to attend

not only weekly religion lessons but also Church services for the so-called Aryans and synagogue for Jews. While co-educational classes, except in small country schools, were normally not in practice, boys and girls were in the same room, a wholly new pedagogical phenomenon for most of us, which gave a silver lining to the otherwise drab experience of Monday afternoon studies.

Heidi Blau sat diagonally from me in the third row. She was well built, perhaps a little too much so, promising to become in due course a substantial matron, but in the thirties, at least in Austria, slender was not necessarily beautiful. As far as I was concerned, her daylight presence provided me with dreams in the hours of dark.

The teacher, Herr Weissmann, was not the kind of instructor who lives on in the memory of his young disciples as having influenced their values, sentiments or morality in any noticeable way. He alternated between eating grapes and cherries, depending on the season, while students stood up in their benches reciting Bible lessons. After each such recitation, based on abundant homework preparation, Herr Weissmann would enter a mark he considered justifiable in his little green teacher's gradebook, before calling on the next victim. If such an educational procedure does not seem like high quality middle school instruction, there was in fact another aspect to it. For while the man did not have a clue to what an interesting, let alone inspiring, course he might have crafted for his young co-religionists had he been endowed with imagination and motivation, the readings he assigned, the maturity of the textbook, and the classroom re-enactment of Jewish lore and holiday rites, as well as scriptural scenes, played a part in providing us adolescents with firm values, Herr Weissmann's unenthusiastic performance notwithstanding.

But one cold November day I learned a not-to-be forgotten lesson, namely that one should employ every caution before making a definitive and final judgment. For on a rainy Monday afternoon Herr Weissmann interrupted his routine of grapes and grades long enough to enter a wholly unexpected and atypical role which stunned us by its suddenness and radical impact. He reminded us, with unsuspected rhetorical power, of the tense political situation in the country and its hazards to Jewish security, pointed to the sinister tokens of ubiquitous antisemitism, and passionately warned us of the potential perils to Jewish interests, a state of affairs, he pontificated loudly and convincingly, which we as Jewish adolescents ignored at our peril. Not that any of us had been exactly ignorant of these dangers, tensions, and anxieties. But none of us, I feel sure, had ever thought of cherry-munching, lethargic Weissmann capable of making such a caring and genuine Ciceronian oration, improvised and, we had no doubt, authentic, an oration outside the sacred class plan, and, most important, uncharacteristic of his projected persona.

But all this was only the prologue, as we soon found out. He had noticed, he said, pacing the room for the first time ever, that one of us, Heidi Blau, was being snubbed and, yes, shunned by the rest of us, especially the girls. This part of the homily stunned us, first because he had noticed Heidi's being snubbed, and that without being privy to our relationships before or after class. How would he note the cold shoulder we had given her, particularly the co-eds, how did he, of all people, see that she felt isolated and rejected? After all, during class proceedings, she gave no sign of the treatment she received or of feeling hurt. Or were we all wrong and there was more to Herr Weissmann than appeared to us? The second reason we were stunned was that the man step-

ped so abruptly out of his role and into our world of peer relationships which we quietly regarded as off-limits for adults, both teachers and often also parents. But of course Herr Weissmann's correct assessment of our internal relationships increased his stature in our eyes. But what I believe each of us at that moment wondered is "why?". What made him without fair notice, so to speak, enter our private business? Soon, however, as an epilogue, as it were, he enlightened us on that point. For he closed his debut as a mentor of the young by saying that in a time when the Jewish people were once again the object of increasingly explicit Jew-baiting we are spending our energy on feuding with each other for, he would bet, picayune reasons, instead of gathering our united strength in facing the impending peril. Now, as he reminded us, was no time to engage in petty intra-faith quarrels, adding that he neither knew nor cared to know exactly the grounds for our enmity for Heidi. By making her a pariah in our midst we showed that we failed the Jewish community we were a part of. In an unusually loud and almost solemn voice he declared that we had better rearrange our priorities instead of engaging in the luxury of personal antipathies, otherwise we would be guilty of ignoring the handwriting on the wall, and put Jewish interests in jeopardy.

Then just as suddenly as he had begun he stopped his sermon,sat down, wiped his brow, and proceeded to dictate our next assignment on Jacob's dream.

We teenagers knew that we had just lived through an out-of-the-ordinary experience. Other teachers,preachy and finger-wagging,would never have been taken as seriously as Herr Weissmann. He showed us a part of himself we could never have imagined. After the bell rang, one of the girls went up to Heidi Blau, tears in her eyes, and hugged her. All the other girls lined up, too. But not the boys. After all, this was Europe in 1937.

Herr Weissmann, I heard much later, did not survive the Holocaust.

Robert Schwarz
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